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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ANKARA 000911

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SUBJECT: RESIGNATION FROM TURKISH CABINET: WHEN AND HOW
WILL A VIABLE ALTERNATIVE TO PM ERDOGAN APPEAR?

(U) Classified by Ambassador Eric Edelman; reasons: E.O.
12958 1.4 (b,d).

1. (C) Summary: Culture and Tourism Minister Mumcu's resignation from the AKP cabinet and the party will not split AKP. Nor is Mumcu or anyone else outside AKP with aspirations to form a credible political alternative able to challenge AKP's dominance in the near term. But Mumcu's move highlights the toll two months of post Dec. 17 drift have taken on PM Erdogan's leadership. Mumcu's now unbraked willingness publicly to expose cabinet incompetence will further encourage more viable centers of opposition to Erdogan -- core institutions of the Turkish state and his own FonMin Gul -- to seek further advantage. Erdogan thus has key decisions to take, and only a short time to do so, if he is to re-establish sustainable leadership. End summary.

2. (C) Culture and Tourism Minister Erkan Mumcu's Feb. 15 resignation from the cabinet and from ruling AKP came as no surprise. A last-minute adherent to AKP before the Nov. 2002 general elections, Mumcu never bothered to conceal his impatience with what he saw as the inept way in which AKP tried to further the more Islamic-oriented elements of its social agenda, e.g., Islamic headscarves ("turban").

3. (C) At the same time, more assertively pious AKP ministers and MPs did not conceal their view that Mumcu was an opportunist, an odd man out with his naked ambition, more "liberal" approach to Islamic values, and attachment to Islamist thinker Fethullah Gulen (seen as a rival movement by those AKP members with roots in the Islamist "Milli Gorus" movement of one-time PM Necmettin Erbakan). Moreover, while marital infidelity appears to be so widespread in the cabinet that even mild-mannered State Minister and Islamic scholar Mehmet Aydin has been known to make ribald jokes about it to colleagues, Mumcu's casual approach has been an easy target for the more hypocritical ones among his former cabinet colleagues, and he was also among those most rumored as likely choices to be axed in any cabinet re-shuffle.

4. (C) While the Turkish press has gone into overtime speculating on the reasons for Mumcu's move, contacts deep inside or close to AKP (Istanbul MP Huseyin Besli, who writes many of Erdogan's speeches; "Bilge" think tank chairman Hasan Osman Celik; and Prime Ministry advisor Aydin Kanat among others we have talked to) do not see the resignation as fracturing AKP. Mumcu may take a handful of unhappy AKP MPs with him. He will appeal to a section of the center-right/right-of-center electorate as well as to some on the center-left. Yet his opportunism, ambition and know-it-all attitude rub too many people the wrong way. The armed forces have never forgiven him for anti-military comments he made at the end of the 1990's. He thus faces a very slippery road ahead.

5. (C) As we assess potential serious challengers to Erdogan, none of the other conventional names appears to have serious traction.

6. (C) Left-of-center CHP chairman Baykal is a loser. Baykal rival Mustafa Sarigul has showed himself to be a corrupt lout. Baykal's Hamlet-like half-rival Kemal Dervis appeals only to an elitist set.

7. (C) Center-right DYP chairman Mehmet Agar, whose tenure as chief of the National Police in the early to mid-1990's is still connected in people's minds with extrajudicial killings and other activities of the "deep state", inspires almost no one. Although right-nationalist MHP appears to have regained some momentum, it is encumbered by a politically bankrupt leadership. Union of Chambers (TOBB) chairman Rifat Hisarciklioglu, seen by some as a stalking horse for Erdogan's chief internal rival, FonMin Abdullah Gul, has a war chest estimated at \$300 million and a nationwide network of more than 350 chambers which he can use to promote his image. However, as appealingly conservative as he appears across Anatolia, his caution makes any eventual candidacy problematic, and his position has not improved over several years despite his clear ambition. Former Istanbul mayor Bedrettin Dalan is too encumbered by rumors of corruption and readiness to assert deep connections to the Turkish military to be an attractive alternative in Anatolia.

18. (C) Our contacts do agree, however, that Mumcu's departure will encourage the broader opposition to think that the once seemingly invulnerable Erdogan is now no longer unassailable. In this regard, two foci of opposition are key.

19. (C) The first are core institutions of the Turkish state, especially the Presidency, the bureaucracy, and the military (active-duty, NOT retired). We have seen these institutions use some "post-post modern" methods to try to check AKP: presidential vetoes of AKP-drafted laws and personnel appointments; regular, statesman-like press briefings by the Turkish General Staff. We are likely to see more use of such methods, combined with feelers to potential rival politicians and broader use of a press which, vulnerable to tax audits, until now has been intimidated by AKP but which will be emboldened by Mumcu's move and by his willingness to leak details embarrassing to Erdogan or other members of the cabinet.

110. (C) The second, more immediately powerful opposition to Erdogan lies within AKP itself. FonMin Gul and parliamentary Speaker Bulent Arinc have separately used Erdogan's frequent absences on foreign trips and his dismissive treatment of cabinet members and MPs to woo disgruntled MPs and to try to consolidate their hold on AKP's provincial organizations.

111. (C) For instance, Gul has quietly begun a series of dinners for MPs, five to ten at a time, to sound them out on where they would like to see the party go; this is an unusual activity for a Turkish FonMin to engage in. Gul has taken more charge of the AKP parliamentary group, which two years ago he claimed to know only poorly, with only one out of five party whips (Faruk Celik) now firmly on Erdogan's side. Gul has also often provoked Erdogan into a harsh escalation of rhetoric on foreign policy issues (e.g., criticizing Israel in April 2004 and U.S. Iraq policy end-January/beginning of February 2005) and then making a U-turn, leaving Erdogan appearing the intemperate one while he appeals to foreign leaders as the reasonable one. Contacts such as AKP MP and Turkey's NATO Parliamentary Assembly chairman Vahit Erdem have characterized Gul's February 14 interview in center-left mass circulation "Milliyet", in which he lavishly praised Secretary Rice and Turkish-U.S. relations in the wake of his

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February 6 meeting and extended one-on-one conversation with the Secretary, as an attempt to portray himself as more capable and appealing than Erdogan.

112. (C) Comment: We agree that by itself Mumcu's resignation will not split AKP. However, his move has attracted heightened attention for two reasons. First, because it comes after two months of inaction on Erdogan's and the GOT's part, inaction which has sparked press commentary from across the spectrum that Erdogan is an absentee PM and that AKP is adrift. Outstanding examples of such commentary are Islamist Ahmet Tasgetiren's February 5 warning to AKP to face up to its responsibilities in pro-AKP "Yeni Safak" and leftist Meral Tamer's February 12 column on AKP's disarray and internal rivalries in "Milliyet". Second, because Mumcu's timing has revived speculation about the effects on the core "secularist" structures of the state from Erdogan's mishandling of the headscarf issue in an ill-considered interview to "Welt am Sonntag" at the Davos Forum.

113. (C) In this context, the next couple of weeks will determine whether Erdogan can re-set AKP on a sustainable course with himself firmly in charge, or whether he continues on a slow but discernible decline. Key indicators will be (1) whether he chooses a chief negotiator for the EU accession process, and whom he chooses; (2) how he fills out or shuffles his cabinet; (3) whether he decides on reforms to high regulatory boards and whether these reforms credibly preserve the boards' autonomy; (4) whether he ensures that his government signs the new IMF stand-by, which has hung fire for two months; (5) how he handles relations with the U.S., especially given Gul's charm offensive; and (5) whether he gathers a new, more astute team of domestic and foreign policy advisors. In this latter regard, we understand from Energy Minister Guler that Erdogan, mindful his current group of advisors has not served him well and worried by Gul's attempts to undercut him, has approved his close friend Guler's preliminary assembly of a team of advisors with deep experience in the Turkish bureaucracy.

114. (C) If Erdogan is unable to right the ship, we foresee an extended period of relative drift, with an eventual split in AKP the most probable way to produce alternatives which would redefine the Turkish political scene.

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